

To Be A Man Is Not Easy ~ A Scar Reminds Me Of The Day I Wept.

Interview With Kwame Baffo



Baffo returned to Ghana in 1994 and stayed at first in Accra, the capital, because the financial expectations of his family home in the village of Nkoranza were far too high. Much more was demanded of him, paying this hospital bill, that funeral and those school fees, than he could afford. Even now, after twelve years, his 'been to overseas' status makes him the banker of the family. This happens to all who leave Ghana and then return as 'a rich man'. Baffo now invests his money in building a second house. Should he have put his money in the bank instead he would have spend it all on family matters. Now the cash is simply not there, it has become a wall, a roof, a building. 'Should I tear down the building to pay your child's bill?' Baffo helped a junior brother through university and now his brother is also 'a success' and helps to share the family burden. His brother follows an exchange program in the Netherlands.

This is Baffo's story:

In 1989 I decided to go to Libya. I was a driver in the hospital at Nkoranza but I wanted a better future and my friends who had gone before urged me to join them in Libya where money comes easier as they said. So I did. It took me 26 days to reach there. Niger, two days waiting for transport at the capital, a day and a half in a truck and three days waiting in Agadez for transport through the desert. The desert treks are risky so the cars depart three at the time. Pick-ups, filled with 25 persons each. You think there's really no more place and then another few persons are pressed inside but eventually full is full! Drivers stick together because of desert storms and mishaps, alone may mean lost. We went. You stand there body to body in the back of the pickup and you cannot turn or move. It was so risky that I wanted to come back but there is no way back. You have one gallon water for three days and you put salt in it which helps you to go slow on the water. You drive at night and in the day you wait somewhere in the shade. You reach the Algerian border town which is called Tamanrasset. Here you stay a week to treat yourself from your illnesses, nose bleedings, heatstrokes, malaria,

craziness. If you pay the Ghanaian agent he cooks for you. Then there is another trip for you, five cars in convoy this time. A three day journey.

You go again with your gallon of salted water, now to the Mount Hogar. There you walk, you have to climb the mountain by foot and it is tough and you are weak. The bag you have is too heavy so people throw one by one their luggage away. If you are lucky you reach the mountaintop and you rest. At four in the evening you start walking. You walk for three days through pure sandy desert, again with another gallon of water. You have hired a guide who leads you to the border with Libya. You see so many corpses dead in the sand and everywhere along the road that you want to return, but return, how?! We Nkoranza people are more in number, in my case we were four, so we looked after each other. If one is sick we tell the guide to stop and wait for the Nkoranza friend to recover. If you are alone the guide does not mind you but if four people say stop he will stop. These guides are from Niger and Algeria. They show you the light of the southern city in Libya and then they return and you go alone. If you miss the light that night you have to wait another day till it is night again. Short of water, short of food, no shade but all you can do is walk on.

Nowadays Mount Hoggar passage is no more used because of armed robbers. In my time it was safe, at least from robbers! Once in Libya there is police everywhere because of the border and so you travel at night, secretly. Again two nights through the desert and then you get to the town called Obare. Now here you know you have made it. Border patrols stop here. I took a bus to Saba and went on to Benghazi. Tripoli is not as safe for black Africans as Benghazi because many more Ghanaians are deported from Tripoli, that's what I was told.

I arrived and settled in the 'Nkoranza house' in Benghazi. At that time there were between forty and sixty Ghanaians from Nkoranza living there. This is how it goes. In the morning you wake up and you go to a certain place. You sit there. A car stops and you all rush and jump on that car. The man says: I need two, you and you. So you sit there and run to each car that stops till they pick you up to work. Work in Libya can be okay but mostly you are cheated if you have to work that way. So I worked my way into a company. We cannot trust the Libyans for they do not see us blacks as humans, they see us as work machines. If the machine breaks they throw stones or leave you to die alone. Not all are bad of course. Say after two years you have completed a job and you wait for your pay. They may just chase you away. A Libyan can bring you to a nice farm in the desert

and give you a nice little house to live in. 'Run the farm for me, okay?' The owner goes and comes back a week later with some food and maybe some money.

'Well done, continue, next week!' People are taken prison for there is no way to cross that desert by foot. I heard of one man who had been alone for a year like that! Ghanaian friends were near to that farm in the desert, they were buying a sheep in that region of the country. Suddenly they heard shouting in our own Twi language: 'Come, come!' They went and it was something! That man was so happy, could not have been made happier by anything but the company of real people, his own people, he had not spoken to anybody for over a year. They spent two days together and talked and talked and talked. Ate the sheep! So then they left him and the man knew a little bit more about the outside world. I heard about another friend who was hired like that. He drove with the Libyan to the desert and after many hours they reached sheep, a lot of sheep. The man said: 'I get you a camel and you look after my sheep, herd them, see that they eat and no one gets lost.' Our friend is from Ghana and does not know a camel but he said 'Okay'. He had no bed to lay his head at night, no roof against the sun, a gallon of water, some food and the owner was gone. The owner returned each week to give him medicines, food and water. After six months the Ghanaian escaped through the desert and came to our Nkoranza House in Benghazi. We thought we saw a ghost or a wild animal, dirty, smelling, burned deeply black and wild hair all over him. The man never made it, he became mad and died.

Egyptians are the dirtiest people. Poverty drives them to Libya, Egypt has no oil. They have no manners at all, no dignity. They can shit in public, they stink and what do they do? They may run a farm and bring one of our black boys there to work. The Egyptian sits there with a heap of stones beside him. If the farmer gets tired and slows down he throws a stone, then another one.

Libya is not a good country apart from the money you can earn. Their women are worse off. Once they marry they are never allowed outside the house not even for shopping. From a slim girl you see them become fat and sloppy within a year from doing nothing and being bored. After puberty they are always escorted and if we blacks even look at them the Libyan boys throw stones at us. They go with a police escort to their schools and no one can come near, not even the Libyans. When they reach the age of 18 the father plants a flag on the house. Here lives a marriageable woman. Two flags, two women. When after 25 they are not married the flag is taken down and their lives are over. Then the woman spends the rest of

her life just being there, a life sentence for being an unmarried woman! No husband, no sex, no child, no outings, nothing.

Our women who go to Libya become prostitutes. They are owned by a Ghanaian man and together they share the income. As even black women are not allowed to cross the streets at night the Ghana prostitutes are dressed like boys, a cap, a jackets, pants, a cigarette, that is how they are escorted by their men to certain houses where Egyptians or Ghanaians or Malians live (very seldom a Libyan man) and brought to a room and used by ten to twenty men one after another. Then they go home in the morning and count how much they got.

I was lucky. I made it so that I worked at a British oil company. They were new in Libya, not yet registered, and so they paid me in local currency instead of in dollars. They wanted me. After they received their registration as a company they said to me: 'Go back to Ghana and get an official visa and come back to work for us so we will pay you in dollars'. That's what I planned to do after two years, to go back to Ghana to make my stay in Libya official, but when I was on my way to the airport I was robbed of all I had, everything. The taxi-drivers! They all know who goes back to Ghana with money! The taxi that drove me diverted me and then robbed me and left me on the road. I waited. I did not weep. I wept only once in my life, which was during my time in Libya.

The rumor went in Benghazi that police would raid our Nkoranza house and arrest us. So every night we slept dressed and ready to run, shoes on top of our chests, that's how we slept. Then after seven nights no one came and we relaxed a bit. Then one week later they came at night. We were forty or so. We fled all possible ways and they only caught one of us. I ran into a forest and my back was injured by a branch. I did not notice it till we all returned from different hideouts and came back to the house. I felt my back and saw that my hand was covered with blood. Blood, dark red blood. When I saw the blood on my hand I wept. Till now I carry that large scar on my back to remind me of the day I wept.

Anyway I was robbed and my Ghanaian friends took care of me and they nursed me back and then they brought me to my company and explained what happened and I worked there another year to earn money for the journey back to Ghana. This time by plane and I transferred my money by bank.

Once in Ghana, just at that moment, there were sanctions and suddenly no more

Ghanaians were allowed into Libya! It was my bad luck! Stuck in Ghana. But I decided to get a visa to Europe instead for I did not have enough money to build up a life in Ghana. It was going to be Czechoslovakia instead of Libya. I paid a local connection man here in Nkoranza and he got me a visa for a trade fair in Prague and I went. We were two men together from Ghana, we planned to go from Prague to Austria because I knew people there. I called Austria but the man said 'No, I cannot come for only two persons'! He said: 'Go to the university in Prague instead and you will find black people there. They will help you.'

The first thing you do in Europe when you have nobody and you are stranded is sleep at a train station. I did that for some days. If you don't meet a black man at the train station then you ask for black disco. That's where blacks come and if you are lucky they will bring you home. At their home for a price they will help you further.

We went to the university, were lucky to meet a black man from Zaire and we stayed at his house. We stayed for one month so this black man also extended our visa. He collected 300 dollar each from us. We should pay another 200 dollars and he would take us to Germany. We had no money so I called my uncle in Hamburg for money. It worked. The connection man from Zaire gave us each a Benin passport. He said we should learn in one hour our own name, the name of the president of Benin, the flag, the capital of Benin, and how to sign the signatory on the passport. And what money they use in Benin. At that time with a Benin passport you didn't need a visa for Germany. It was very cold when we crossed the German border and that was our luck! The custom man stayed in his warm office and stamped our passports unseen. This was our second attempt to cross to Germany, the first one failed and we were sent back to Czechoslovakia.

Winter 1992, we were in a car with our man from Zaire driving to Hamburg. The Zairian took our Benin passports back to Prague and never gave us our Ghanaian passports back because of security checks. So we had no passports. Long drive, over 24 hours to Hamburg. My uncle met us at the train station and the Zairian returned home. Once in Germany we could not stay unless we would seek political asylum so we say we are both wanted in Ghana and it is not safe for us to return. I filed at the detention place but there were 500 people in line before me and it was only the next day that they took my credentials and transferred me to a house for asylum-seekers. A line of people of all nations, Philipinos, Chinese, blacks from all over Africa, a long line, and every day more people, I was amazed. After a

month they transferred me to Heidelberg and they gave me a bed and food, 260 Marks per month. Then you get an ID card and seek work. They don't speak English in Germany so you need to learn five sentences: 'Good Morning', 'How are you', 'Where is the boss', 'Can you give me a job', 'Thank You Sir'. After two months I had a job, baking bread, it was a nice job for the people were nice to me. I worked every night in the bakery and overtime too. But they still worried me for I had to come to court and when they said 'No, you can't stay here' I had to make an appeal. While the lawyer is fighting for you, you just work. After a year at the bakery the lawyer said that all was refused but he was going to make another appeal.

One morning I come home to my rented room and from the hall I see a police car. I suspect that they come for me and go into my room and lock it. Then I open the window and climb out and into the window of other people. They were from Zaire. They did not see me and I slide under their bed. The police searched everywhere and also came into the room of the Zairians. Police said they were looking for Mr. Baffo, they mentioned my name but the Zairians said 'no, we have not seen him for three days' and then they left and I crawled from under their bed. They gasped! I heard that my workplace too had been told that I was wanted. With the Zairians we were still discussing how I could run away and then the police car returned to our building. They went to my room straight, I heard them, they now went for the other Ghanaian who lived with me, his name is Adyei. He was there for he could not be warned and they arrested him and sent him to Ghana. I heard it all. Later I ran to my worksite and asked for my pay saying that they are after me. They pay on certain days only but I was lucky that the bakers woman was good enough to hide me there for 5 days till they gave me my pay. Then I had all I wanted. I went to my room to pack my things and hide but the police were there! You know why? The woman who lived down from us was spying on all of us and informed the police that I was around! Police arrested me with handcuffs. Court. The judge asked why did I not leave Germany on the date given. I said because the lawyer made an appeal. They said if we send you to Ghana now what will you do? I said nothing. My lawyer told me he was still fighting. They sent me to another center but I was down and lost interest. I started to think. My mind counted my money and my prospects and said to me: 'Better go home now'. I had already bought a minibus from my overtime money which I had shipped to Ghana and I had saved some money. 1000 dollars and 6900 German Marks. I decided to stop this thing and go home to Ghana. I was not all that sad for I now had money

to make a life in Ghana though I wanted more. Two policemen came to sit at my side on Swissair and I went back to Ghana like that, like a thief. In 1994 I was flown back to Ghana. That is my story!

From my savings I built a house. It is the house I now live in. The bus eventually collapsed because it was already second hand to begin with. I have a wife and two girls, 10 and 6, and I moved back to Nkoranza where life is easier than in the big city of Accra. I have a good life, despite the fact that my family comes to knock at my door day and night. I say please I have no money but to your family you can't say you have no money when there is a sick one or a coffin to be bought. You have to do it. Other times you should not do it. It hardens a bit to say no, but much of the time it is 'no'.

Do it again? No, never! If someone wants to go I advise him against it. It is too risky and people die on the way. Everybody regrets but halfway you cannot turn back and sometimes when you come back to Ghana you only tell the good part. People here in Nkoranza see those who were lucky and return with money to build a house so they say 'why would I not also go?'

Nkoranza is the most important Libya-connection town in Ghana. Long ago two people went to Libya and came back to Nkoranza with tractors. That story went around the whole country and so Nkoranza became the centre for travel to Libya. There are people here who do passports, yellow fever, connection for travel, money transfers, all can be done here. People come from everywhere and wait till they have a chance to go to Libya.

To Europe too, I would never go again. It is tough. You work hard and have no other life than work and being chased. At times in Germany we had the skinheads who would aim at blacks and gang on us, knife us to kill, things like that.

Other blacks give Africans the bad name. Gambian people in our flat in Germany were bad news, they sold cocaine, openly even. One night we saw people knocking on our door and they had masks. We were very afraid. We thought they were skinheads. But they were policemen and came with guns and they searched the whole building and made pictures of everyone. They found cocaine in between the panels of the doors of the Gambians. The dogs sniffed it out. We never saw those Gambians again, arrested, in jail. But we Africans get a bad reputation because of those Gambian drug dealers.

In Libya they throw stones at you and spit at you, cheat you and let you work like a slave. All bad things you can imagine happen in Libya! No, I do not advise anyone to go either to Libya or to Europe. Not now, there is no work now in Europe and there is work in Ghana. Somewhat better, Ghana. Many people who have suffered so much from these journeys have mental problems. You see them here in Nkoranza too, they were unlucky and never recovered from the shame. They got mad.